

**Testimony of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Connecticut
Before the Public Safety and Security Committee
February 18, 2014**

IN SUPPORT OF

S.B. No 98 AN ACT ESTABLISHING STANDARDS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOL SECURITY PERSONNEL

Good morning, Senator Hartley, Representative Dargan and members of the Public Safety and Security Committee. My name is Daniela Giordano and I am the Public Policy Director with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Connecticut. NAMI Connecticut is the state affiliate of NAMI, the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for all those affected by mental illness. NAMI Connecticut offers support groups across the state, educational programs, and advocacy for improved services, more humane treatment and an end to stigma and economic and social discrimination. We represent individuals living with mental health challenges and parents and family members of individuals living with such challenges. I am writing to you today on behalf of NAMI Connecticut as well as staff to the Keep the Promise (KTP) Coalition Children's Committee to support SB 98 An Act Establishing Standards for Public School Security Personnel. KTP is Connecticut's largest group of stakeholders advocating for smart policy reforms and systems change to benefit children, youth and adults impacted by mental health challenges.

We support training and standards for people who take on the important and sometimes difficult role of providing security in Connecticut's schools. We are concerned, however, that the only areas specifically identified in this regard are "drug addiction" and "gang identification". Guidelines released by the U.S. Department of Education regarding school climate and discipline¹ just last month stresses that the role of school security personnel, including school resources officers, should be to protect students, be informal mentors and reduce inappropriate student referrals to law enforcement.

However, the presence of police officers in schools has greatly increased the number of student arrests in Connecticut, the majority of which are not for serious or violent offenses. Rather, these arrests occur for low-level, non-violent offenses, such as breach of peace and disorderly conduct which in many cases are the result of unmet behavioral and mental health needs. It is widely recognized that twenty percent of all children have a diagnosable mental health condition. Drop-out rates among students classified as Emotionally Disturbed (ED) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are

¹ U.S. Department of Education. *Guiding Principles – a Resources Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline*. Available at: <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/guiding-principles.pdf>

alarmingly high, over 50%. Additionally, 65-70% of youth in juvenile detention have a diagnosable behavioral health condition. Rather than pushing children out of school for problem behaviors, we must work towards creating a positive school climate for learning and social development so that every child has an opportunity for success.

A crucial component of this positive school climate is adequately trained school resource officers. The U.S. Department of Education's guidelines released last month recommend that:
"Training for school-based law enforcement officers should also address such topics as basic childhood and adolescent development, age-appropriate responses, disability issues, and conflict resolution and de-escalation techniques. Other necessary topics are bias-free policing (including implicit or unconscious bias and cultural competence), restorative justice practices, and how to identify and refer for services those students exposed to trauma and violence. Given the specificity of a school context, the training should cover special considerations related to law enforcement activities in a school setting, student privacy rights, and working with specific groups of students, such as those at risk for dropping out of school, trauma, social exclusion, or behavior incidents. In addition, training should review the negative collateral consequences associated with youth involvement in the juvenile and criminal justice systems, and how to prevent and reduce such involvement through use of alternative strategies, such as referral to local programs, including local mental health programs. Finally, wherever possible such training should be conducted jointly with school administrators and other school staff, including mental health professionals".
(End of quotation).

A complementary and crucial strategy to reduce the number of school-based arrests of children with problem behaviors, is a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between school districts and the police departments who provide school recourse offers, which outlines the respective roles of school personnel and security personnel. A model MOU has been developed by the state's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee, within the Office of Policy and Management, together with educators, police and others, and has been implemented successfully in some communities. Other, and arguably all, communities could benefit from utilizing this tool.

We all want our schools to *be* safe places. And, we want schools to be environments where children and youth *feel* safe, meaning a place where they are valued and supported, especially when they are struggling with extra challenges such as behavioral or mental health challenges. In order to have both, we need to support school security personnel by providing training that helps them understand child development, mental health concerns, and clarifies their own roles in schools.

Thank you and please let us know if we can answer any questions for you.
Genuinely, Daniela Giordano